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A-ONE #0601 01/02/04

~ HighWire Update News! ~ People Are Talking! ~ Happy New Year 2004!
~ Narrowing Net Searches ~ Readying Holiday Fare! ~ Cyber Blackmail!

~ Net Nudity Gets Ticket ~ Mitnick Writing Book! ~ XIII Lucky Number?
~ AOL's Top Spam List! ~ Bulk E-Mail Issues! ~ GTA Suit Moves!

-* AOL Anti-Spam Suit Dismissed *-
-* AOL Debuts Inexpensive Web Service! *-
-* Apple Users Threaten To Sue Over Hardware! *-

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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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Welcome to the new year! We hope that you all had a terrific new year's celebration! For me, I welcomed in the new year with the headphones on, listening to a few new CDs, and having a few drinks. I turned on the television in time to see that ageless Dick Clark talking to a couple of M&Ms characters, and "the ball" dropping in Times Square.

I usually spend New Year's day watching college football bowl games, but I just didn't feel like it this year. Maybe it was because I'm usually on vacation this week; and I wouldn't normally have to go to work the day fater New Year's. Well, for whatever reason this year, I didn't do any football. It was a good day to relax. This week, like last week, is one of those long short work weeks! It's great to have a holiday in the middle of the week, but hard to go back - it feels like a Monday all over again! <grin>

Well, it's also a slow week for news, but we've still got plenty in this week's issue. So, let's get to it!

Until next time...

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HighWire 0.1.6 is Released

Welcome to the latest release of HighWire, 0.1.6!

As I write this Developer letter it struck me that this is our 3rd Christmas (oh well, slightly delayed, but still..) release!

I'd like to take a moment to thank one person behind a lot of those hours of coding, Ralph Lowinski (aka AltF4). Without his dedication and skills, HighWire would NOT be what it is today!

So what is new with in this release? First of all it should be pointed out that more than anything else, the aim with this release was to clean up the things that were new to 0.1.5 and increase overall stability. Even so, there have been some additions as well. Here is a list of some of the most significant changes:

* The cache system has been reworked, cached files will now be used over subsequent sessions
* The reload button performs a reload of online pages, not only a reparse from the cache
* Implemented basic CSS support for BIG, SMALL, FONT, SUB, SUP, H1..6, P, DD, DT, DD and SPAN tags.
* Parsing of <STYLE> areas
* Pop-ups are now aligned always to the screen extents
* Meta tag 'http-equiv=expires' implemented
* OVL for the TCP/IP stack iConnect added

See the Change.Log for more details of updates and the example.cfg/highwire.cfg for explanations of new configuration keywords!

Now for another repeat, Baldrick's call for volunteers:

If you are interested in helping with the HighWire project, don't hesitate to get in touch with any member of the development team and let them know. There are lots of areas where more people would make the job easier. If you can't program, then consider helping with the documentation or get involved with submitting bug reports. If you are a programmer and are interested in working on the code of HighWire, then definitely get in contact with the development team.

Translations into other languages would also be a nice addition to the project. While we have many different languages spoken by members of the development team, we only have language support for French and English.

Not only is a modern browser needed for our platform. It is our belief that our best option is one that is native and open source. To reach that goal we will need time and the help of community.

Thank you,

HighWire Development Team

http://highwire.atari-users.net

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING

compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. I trust that your New Year's celebration was free from trouble. I always stay off the roads on New Years eve. I figure that, with so many morons out there on the road... They can do without one more. <grin>

I'm about to gorge myself on another holiday meal tradition. Things have been so screwed up around here that we didn't have the traditional Christmas turkey (well, traditional in my house, anyway) until three

days after Christmas.

And here we are today, on the day after New Year’s Day, getting ready to have our traditional (again, traditional in my house) baked ham.

When it comes to special dinners like this, I’m the cook here. I’ve had this puppy in the oven for several hours, with several hours more to go, and already you can smell the aroma of a special meal wafting through the house. It’s a smoky, sweet, rich smell that says that everything is going as it should, and that when the time is right it’ll make itself known.

You know, most of the time I don’t have a target thought in mind when I start writing this column. This is one of those times.

Some of the time (I figure around 40% of the time), I do have a point that I want to make. Other times (around 50% of the time), I don’t have a point to make and I just end up ambling around for a while until I figure that you’re just about to stop reading and turn on the television.

But that remaining ten percent is what makes this all worth while. Those are the times that I don’t have an agenda in mind when I start writing and I just sort of free-associate. But during that wondrous ten percent of the time when the stars are in proper alignment, or when my neurons are all firing as they should, or whatever it is that finally "connects the dots" in my mind, I find that I’ve made a point unintentionally. Usually, it’s a pretty good point. Hell, sometimes it even has to do with computers. Once in a great while it even has to do with Atari computers. This is not one of those "Atari computers" times. But when I wrote "... that says everything is going as it should" up above, it made me wonder about how many people actually understand that there are certain times when the things around us coalesce... when everything ’falls into place’ and you can see or smell or hear that everything is exactly as it should be.

I see lots of people who never seem to be ’connected’ to what they’re doing. They just go through the motions like they’re following a recipe to the letter, but they haven’t got a clue about either the ingredients or what the outcome is going to be.

I can already tell that that holiday ham is going to be a good one. I can tell that the evening will be filled with light conversation, good food, and good cheer. And amidst the confusion and clutter, among the condiments and side dishes on the table, there will be a feeling of thankfulness in the bounty that we’ve been given.

I know, I know, I got a little preachy there, but gimme a break.... just this once, okay? <grin>

Well, let’s get to the news, hints, tips and info available from the UseNet.

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup
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’Jon’ asks about the ICD Link II:

"Is there anyone out there that might have the docs for the ICD Link II adapter? I recently acquired an adapter, but, no docs. I know it’s pretty straight forward, but, I’m having difficulty with chaining other drives to it. Any help is appreciated. ICD will not support anything Atari."

Edward Baiz tells Jon:

"Just what exactly is happening? It could be your hard drive software. Just what are you using? You should be using HDDriver.."

Jon replies:

"I’m using the ICD Link II software that came with the adapter. For some reason, the CD Rom isn’t being seen. I have it terminated at the end of the chain and there is 5 volts present as the on board LED is lit up. What I’m not sure about is the termination at the first drive. I don’t know if this adapter requires termination both before the device and after or just at the end of the chain."

Benoit Morrissette tells Jon to use...

"Only one termination at the end of the chain. Also, make sure that each device has a different SCSI ID."

Frank Szymanski posts this about his CT60:

"I just want to tell that with TOS 4.04 (0.99g), ABE 5L and SDR 5E my NOVA software (EMULATOR.PRG and STA_VDI.PRG/Afterburner versions) runs on my ct60.

Unfortunately when I install the NOVA card itself in my Falcon the computer immediately crashes. The ATARI logo (not the ct60 logo) appears but only in a very distorted way and then the computer hangs.

I don’t know whether it is the extension of the falcon bus or the new firmware of my ct60.

Is there anybody out there who uses his NOVA with the ct60?"

Rodolphe Czuba asks Frank:

"DID you disconnect the BG signal (jumper trace) on the nova adaptor ???
I assume you soldered 2 mal/mal connectors on the nova adaptor to be able to plug the CT60 on it... ok ?
But you need too to cut the trace between the pins #20 & #22 on the J20 (30 pins)."

Frank tells Rodolphe:

"Yes, I did all that. When I did my first tests the NOVA software refused to work (it crashed at startup) but after I flashed to the latest ABE/SDR and TOS 0.99g the software didn't crash any longer so I removed the NOVA card from my second falcon and reinstalled it in my ct60 falcon.

Unfortunately this time I had these weird effects. When I tried it for the first time (with the old SDR/ABE) the logo wasn't distorted so I suppose that it might be the connectors.

Well, due to the reason that it is always a LOT of work to remove the NOVA from one falcon to the other I wanted to know whether someone already has been successful."

Rodolphe replies:

"Do you speak about a new modified 060 nova driver or the original one ???

If nobody patched the driver, it may not work!
If there is no board, the driver sees that and some accesses to the board are not done! So, the fact that the driver runs alone doesn't mean that the driver is good with 060 !"

Frank tells Rodolphe:

"Someone wrote a new emulator.prg and this one worked (without NOVA). Then I received a new STA_VDI.PRG and therefore I tried to reinstall the NOVA. But when I did my first tests with my NOVA the falcon booted (although when running emulator.prg it crashed with a debug output). This time it even didn't had a chance to crash (distorted ATARI logo)."

Odd Skancke tells Frank:

"If you can get Emulator.prg to run, and the XCB API is the same across all cards Nova drives, perhaps you'd be interested in testing this with oVDI instead of STA_VDI? If you are on the MiNT-list you know how to get to the source and compile yourself a binary. If not, let me know."

Mark Duckworth posts this about the GAIM instant messenger:

"Hey folks, as a nice holiday present to fulfill some wishes out there I have compiled a nice present for you all. Gaim with all plugins compiled in. Now nearly every IM protocol is possible from Atari! With debugging symbols removed and stack size fixed this binary seems a bit faster! After downloading, perform the following! gzip -d gaim_all_plugins.gz, cp gaim_all_plugins /usr/bin, chmod +x gaim_all_plugins, start your x server, run it, and chat with YOUR favorite protocol. Unfortunately MSN doesn't work Thanks MS, *flicks the bird*, however gadu gadu, jabber, and yahoo should (hopefully) still work. To get MSN we need to get gtk2 port done. When gtk2 is done I am in a better position to start aesvdi-gtk2 and then possibly we will have some speedy unix programs running on atari without an x server! Happy Holidays!

PS: Only use if you have gaim RPM installed already!

As always, the obligatory screenshot:

http://toad.atari-source.com/~mduckworth/all_plugins.gif

And the binary:
http://toad.atari-source.com/~mduckworth/gaim_all_plugins.gz "

'Meffy' got himself a Falcon. NOW he wants to know what he can do with it:

"Total noob alert... Only used an ST last about 10 years ago...

Got myself a German Falcon, now with English keyboard fitted. There is a HD fitted but it does not boot... might be knackered or no driver installed or blank.

Questions:

1) How can I find the TOS version?

2) How can I find the Ram size. I recall 4mb being mentioned but it could be less (need to UG) or more?

3) How can I change the NVRam settings to get it in English?

4) OK, when its in English what is the best way to go about getting her up and running... hard disk software perhaps?

5) Can I use PC Formatted 1.44Mb drives and just copy files onto these on my PC and then read on Atari. ISTR that ST's read PC disks fine."

John Garone tells Meffy:

"1) If you have it booted by floppy, open the Control Panel: General CPX/Status shows TOS version. If you need a control panel, E-mail me (remove -NOT- from my address) and I'll send you XCONTROL.ACC and some CPXs.

2) Again, if you have it booted by floppy, open the Control Panel: General CPX/Status shows available RAM. If you see available RAM over 4 meg (most likely over 12 meg with little in the Auto folder) then you're fitted with a 16 meg board (14 meg recognized). If you see over 1 meg you have a 4 meg board. Under a meg you have only a 1 meg board! The bigger the better!

3) Get BOOT132 at http://www.seimet.de/atari_english.html

4) http://www.seimet.de has a demo of HDDriver to get you started

5) yup! "

Well folks, that's it for this time around. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Video Game Lawsuit Moves!
""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""" XIII Is A Lucky Number?

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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Lawsuit Against Popular Video Game Moves

A lawsuit that claims a top-selling video game is dangerous to society and asks that it be removed from store shelves will be decided in federal court.

Haitian civil rights groups filed the lawsuit because the game, Grand Theft Auto: Vice City, instructs players to "kill the Haitians" and awards points for each kill.

The New York-based Rockstar Games Inc. has agreed to remove the offensive line from future versions of the award-winning video that has sold 11 million copies.

But the Haitian organizations, led by the Haitian-American Coalition of Palm Beach County, have also asked for more than $15,000 in damages.

The suit was filed Dec. 23 in state circuit court in Palm Beach County. Attorneys for Rockstar Games opted to move the case to federal court, and that motion was granted Tuesday. No hearing dates were immediately set.

The lawsuit takes on heavyweights in the video game industry, including Rockstar Games, its parent company Take-Two Interactive Software Inc., Sony Computer Entertainment, the Microsoft Corp., and retailers Target, Wal-Mart and Best Buy.

The manufacturer of the game, in which an ex-convict is hired to recover stolen drug money in the streets of Miami, has been harshly criticized for its portrayal of Haitians.

Earlier this month, about 100 Haitian-Americans demonstrated outside a Wal-Mart Supercenter in nearby Boynton Beach chanting, "Stop Vice City."

Attorneys for the Haitian organizations and the video game manufacturer did not return phone calls late Wednesday.

'XIII' Is Lucky Number for Conspiracy Lovers

First, the bad news about "XIII." It is a saga that doesn’t end. When you’ve killed off all the bad guys and apparently saved the day, you get a big fat "To be continued ..." message.

That’s because this new console and PC game from UbiSoft: adventure covers only the first five volumes of the 15-issue comic book series that serves as the basis for this game. Enough material remains for at least two sequels.

Although I like a multi-part adventure as much as the next person, I also like to know in advance if I’m not getting a complete story.

Unfortunately, there is no such warning for players of "XIII" ("Thirteen") as they try to determine if the main character in the game is really guilty of assassinating the U.S. president.

It’s probably no coincidence that this tale of government conspiracy stars David Duchovny, best known for his role as an FBI agent in television’s "The X-Files." The series spent nine years tantalizing viewers with stories of alien abductions, government cover-ups and secret cabals.

In "XIII," Duchovny is the voice of a government agent found washed up a New England beach, his memory wiped after being shot in the head. The only clues to his identity are a tattoo of "XIII" on his chest and a key to a New York safe deposit box.

The agent is found by a gorgeous lifeguard straight out of a "Baywatch" episode, who gets gunned down less than a minute after getting him to a first-aid post. It’s up to the player to quickly round up some weapons (Who knew that guns and ammunition can be found lying around in a first-aid station?) and start knocking off the men trying to aerate XIII’s torso.

From that point on, "XIII" unfolds like a by-the-book shooting game, with players viewing everything through XIII’s eyes. You must pick off the bad guys as rapidly as possible, scrounging for weapons and ammo as you go. In some cases, you’ll need to grab a chair to knock out a guard, or use stealth to get past people.

What makes "XIII" an atypical first-person shooter is its distinctive comic book style. During some action scenes, most notably when you’ve shot someone perched in a high place, panels pop up on the screen to show the thug falling toward the pavement. When people are walking behind doors or walls, you can "see" their footsteps as sound effects appear as words on the screen. The game calls it "visual audio."

In addition, the images are flattened and surrounded by black lines to give the game a two-dimensional cartoon look. I played the Xbox version and found that everything worked as smoothly as a well-oiled sniper’s rifle.

If you’re playing this game because you’re a big Duchovny fan, prepare to be disappointed, at least in the early stages. Although his voice is prominent in the advertisements and promotional videos, he’s the strong silent type here. I spent most of my time thinking, "Yep, that sounds like Duchovny grunting." It’s not much more rewarding than that.

The other notable voice is the unmistakable timbre of Adam West, who played Batman on television in the late 1960s. Here, he portrays a general who must be saved.

"XIII" has a few annoying elements.

Although Duchovny’s character supposedly has been shot in the head, you see no trace of an injury and his abilities certainly aren’t hindered by the bullet wound once the guys with guns show up at the first-aid shack.

The instruction booklet has some irksome omissions. Novice players will find themselves without a clue on which buttons to push when they need to crouch or retrieve the grappling hook they’ve been given to get to a rooftop.

And I still haven’t figured out why one thug can shoot through the door and hit me, yet I can’t return the favor.

Production for "XIII" began in 2000. Let’s hope conspiracy lovers won’t have to wait another three years just to get the second installment.

Prices for "XIII" range from $30 for the PlayStation 2 version to $50 for GameCube. It’s also available for Windows and Xbox. Only the Windows version has cheat codes to help you through the game but, as always, the console versions are more likely to run without technical glitches. The BradyGames strategy guide costs $15. It’s rated for mature audiences because of the blood and intense violence.

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A-ONE’s Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

AOL Anti-Spam Lawsuit Dismissed

A federal judge has dismissed a lawsuit by AOL against a group of Florida computer technicians that the leading Internet provider charged with helping deliver spam e-mails, lawyers for the technicians said on Tuesday.

Albo & Oblon, the firm representing the technicians, said Claude Hilton, chief judge for the U.S. District Court in eastern Virginia, dismissed the suit last Wednesday.

The firm said the judge found that Virginia courts did not have jurisdiction over the Florida-based defendants, even though AOL, a unit of Time Warner Inc., does business in Virginia and the unwanted e-mails were directed there.

A spokesman for AOL was not immediately available for comment. The company has aggressively backed federal laws and other industry efforts designed to curb the flow of spam, which has emerged as a scourge in email inboxes.

Laws Raise New Bulk E-mail Issues

Legitimate businesses face new state and federal anti-spam laws that took effect Thursday, and they raise new issues for businesses trying to use e-mail within the letter of the law.

The CAN-SPAM Act of 2003 may not have much impact on offshore operations - those beyond the reach of U.S. law enforcement - but the new law will have an impact on some respectable companies, said Charles Kennedy, a lawyer specializing in computer and communications law.

"A guy with a server in Antigua sending porn won’t comply. But a U.S. bank offering credit cards will have to comply," said Kennedy, an attorney in the Washington, D. C., office of Morrison & Foerster.

The legislation, signed Dec. 16 by President Bush, was aimed to eliminate the patchwork of states’ anti-spam regulations. A particularly tough law in California was also scheduled to take effect Thursday, but the federal law will pre-empt most of the provisions of the anti-spam laws of California and other states, Kennedy said.

Kennedy said he has advised more than 200 clients - all legitimate users and would-be users of e-mail messages - to focus on two main issues regarding the new law. First, they must provide an "opt-out"-an e-mail or URL address users can utilize to stop the sender from sending future unsolicited messages. Second, there must be a label in the message specifying that the message is an ad or a solicitation.

"Everything is a little less confusing because of the federal law," Kennedy said. "A big reason for the federal law was the confusion caused by the state laws. The states can still enforce some anti-spam (provisions) and state prosecutors can even use some parts of the federal law."

Kennedy recommends that respectable operations sending legitimate e-mail should also acquaint themselves with European anti-spam regulations. "The Europeans," he said, "are generally more aggressive about e-mail. If you are an American company, you have to be careful if you have an office or a server in Europe."

Get Out of Debt! AOL Releases Top Spam List

Viagra. Lowest mortgage rates. Hot XXX action. As seen on Oprah. Still reading? Seen this somewhere?

Those four phrases and six more topped the list of the most commonly-used subject lines for junk, or "spam" e-mail in 2003, Internet service provider AOL said on Wednesday.

Other top enticements, the Time Warner Inc. unit said, included "online pharmacy," "get bigger," "online degree," "lowest insurance rates," "work from home" and "get out of debt."

Unsolicited commercial e-mail is considered a scourge of the Internet and, as governments rush to regulate or ban the sending of spam, private companies and service providers have also stepped up efforts to create filtering software that blocks such messages.

During calendar 2003, AOL blocked nearly 500 billion spam messages from reaching user inboxes, an average of 40 fewer such messages per day per subscriber account. The company said it regularly blocks 75 percent to 80 percent of incoming mail as spam.

The manager of AOL's postmaster team, which oversees e-mail, said new laws and regulations had made spam more complex by knocking "amateurs" out of the business.

"I don't know that they're really getting smarter, but I think we're really sorting out the wheat from the chaff," Charles Stiles told Reuters.

Fighting spam is also a more difficult problem than it used to be, Stiles said, as professional spammers take to using tricks like spelling words slightly wrong, replacing letters with numbers and adding spaces in the middle of words in order to fool filters.

"I think the biggest challenge is getting to the die-hard spammers," Stiles said. "They will break the law, they will abuse other peoples computers, they will steal network space."

Apple Users Threaten to Sue Over IBook, IPod

Can a few bad apples - like product quality complaints and potential lawsuits - spoil the bunch for loyal fans of Apple Computer Inc. ahead of their biggest party of the year?

As enthusiasts devoted to Apple prepare to descend on San Francisco next week for the annual Macworld conference, at least two online petitions have collected hundreds of signatures from potential plaintiffs seeking to file lawsuits over claims of defects in the iBook laptop.

Another growing source of complaints surrounds Apple's wildly-popular iPod line of digital music players, which many enthusiasts believe will get an upgrade at Macworld with the introduction of smaller, less-expensive models and a range of case colors.

In California, a lawsuit seeking class-action status is expected to be filed January against the company over the claim that Apple's warranty does not run long enough to cover problems with the player's battery.

Apple has won raves over the years for its sleekly designed computers. The company, with a market share of around 2 percent, is able to command higher prices due in part to Apple machines being perceived as more secure and reliable than PCs running Microsoft's Windows operating system.

Taken together, both consumer campaigns against a company that prides itself on high standards for design and engineering threaten to cast a shadow over Macworld, historically a forum for Apple and its charismatic leader, Steve Jobs, to showcase new products and innovations.

An Apple spokeswoman declined to comment on both questions of pending litigation and the claims of defective computers.

Users of Apple's iBook have been reporting problems with their iBooks in increasing numbers in the last few weeks, according to Ric Ford, president of MacIntouch Inc., which runs the MacIntouch.com Website, an independent

site for Mac users.

But Ford attributed the increased chatter more to the fact that some users have narrowed in on the cause of the long-standing problems rather than the impending start of the Macworld show.

"I don’t think it’s really related to Macworld," Ford said. "I think the problems have been there, but people are starting to understand the source of the problems."

The difficulties stem from the iBook’s logic board, or motherboard, users say in discussion forums and on message boards - including boards on Apple’s own Web site. Many users report replacement units have the same problems with display and video output.

Most of the complaints pertain to a particular iBook model with dual USB ports, and many users say the problems started to show up just after the computer came out of warranty.

One of the petition sites, BlackCider.com, which uses as its logo an apple with a screw run through it, has 408 signatures from potential lawsuit participants.

Site owner Michael Johnson also offers T-shirts with the site logo on front and "Ask me about my logic board" on back.

The other Web site, created by Brendan Carolan at PetitionOnline.com, has collected 850 signatures and calls on Apple to either extend the iBook warranties or offer a replacement.

Neither Johnson nor Carolan were immediately available for comment.

The claims of problems have also extended to the company’s higher-end PowerBook line. Macworld magazine, in its December issue, said it had to return three of six 15-inch aluminum PowerBook G4s it ordered for testing purposes because of defects.

Meanwhile, a video making the rounds of the Internet shows a man spray-painting the message "IPod’s unreplaceable battery lasts only 18 months" on iPod posters.

The filmmaker, Casey Neistat, said in a note on his Web site, ipodsdirtysecret.com, that he decided to make the film after his unit essentially died in September and he was told the battery could not be replaced. Subsequently, Apple has begun offering a $99 battery replacement service.

Vivisimo Helps Narrow Net Search for Info

As wonderful as Internet search engines are, they have a pretty big flaw. They often deliver too much information, and a lot of it isn’t quite what we’re looking for. Who really bothers to read the dozens of pages of results that Google generates?

Some intriguing technologies are getting better at bringing order to all that chaos, and could revolutionize how people mine the Internet for information.

Software now emerging analyzes search results and automatically sorts them into categories that, at a glance, present far more information than the typical textual list.

"We enliven the otherwise deadening process of searching for information," said Raul Valdes-Perez, co-founder of Vivisimo Inc., which quickly puts search results into clickable categories.

Pittsburgh-based Vivisimo sells its technology to companies and intelligence agencies, and offers free Web searches at Vivisimo.com.

Valdes-Perez describes his company this way: If the Internet is a giant bookstore in which all the books are piled randomly on the floor, then Vivisimo is like a superfast librarian who can instantly arrange the titles on shelves in a way that makes sense.

Consider it a 21st century Dewey Decimal System designed to fight information overload. But unlike libraries, Vivisimo doesn’t use predefined categories. Its software determines them on the fly, depending on the search results. The filing is done through a combination of linguistic and statistical analysis, a method that even works with other languages.

A similar process powers Grokker, a downloadable program that not only sorts search results into categories but also "maps" the results in a holistic way, showing each category as a colorful circle. Within each circle, subcategories appear as more circles that can be clicked on and zoomed in on.

It takes a few minutes to get used to Grokker. But the value of its nonlinear approach quickly becomes clear.

Let’s say, for example, you’re curious about accommodations in France and enter a search for "Paris Hilton."

Google recognizes this as a search in the category of "Regional-Europe-Travel and Tourism-Lodging-Hotels" but still produces page after page with links about celebrity socialite Paris Hilton and her exploits. That’s because Google’s engine ranks pages largely based on how many other sites link to them, sending the most popular pages to the top.

If you run the search on Grokker, however, the resulting circle shows all the possible categories of information the Internet offers on a search for "Paris Hilton" - including reviews, maps and online booking sites for the Hilton hotel in Paris, which are all but buried in the Google rankings. Now you’ve much more quickly found not what is popular among Internet gawkers, but what is genuinely useful to you.

Groxis Inc., the 15-person company that introduced Grokker last year and released an upgraded, $49 second version in December, is not out to replace Google. Grokker is not in itself a search engine - it only analyzes and illustrates search engines’ results.

For example, Grokker2 can categorize and map files on your hard drive - arranging them by content, not by the folders you happened to put them in - or listings on Amazon.com. If you use Grokker2 to search the Web, it combines results from six search engines - Yahoo, MSN, AltaVista, Wisenut, Teoma and FAST, a business-focused product by a Norwegian company.

In 2004, Grokker plans to release up to two dozen downloadable plug-ins

that will set its colored circles loose on a wider variety of databases, including the Library of Congress, news Web sites and yes, Google itself.

"We now have the capability to ‘grok’ anything," said R.J. Pittman, chief executive of Sausalito, Calif.-based Groxis. Would-be Grokkers, a note of caution: it requires Windows 2000 or XP or Mac OS X.

The Google plug-in is partly a market test; Google and Groxis will analyze how well it works and then consider whether to work on developing a service together, Pittman said.

Google spokesman Nathan Tyler declined to comment on Groxis. Nor would he say whether Google is exploring its own measures of sprucing up search pages with categorization tools like Vivisimo or visualization aids like Grokker.

Another visualization possibility is offered by TouchGraph LLC, which has a Google plug-in that shows links as an interconnected web, an appropriate image for the World Wide Web.

Such tools have been applied by the Manhattan firm Plumb Design in its Visual Thesaurus, which maps a word’s meanings, or in a navigation tool it developed for a Smithsonian Institution exhibit.

Meanwhile, a number of search sites have gotten hip to honing results.

For example Teoma, which is part of Ask Jeeves Inc., suggests ways to refine or narrow a search. That means a Teoma search for "Las Vegas" will serve up roughly the same links as other sites, but it also suggests "Vacation Packages" and "Vegas Wedding Chapel."

"Search has to evolve," Pittman said. "It can’t just be Google sitting there with a stash of places they’ve crawled on the Web. People are becoming more astute and demanding better results, and they’re demanding a more powerful search experience. People like to get a landscape of information once they’ve found out there’s one available."

AOL Debuts Lower-Priced Internet Service

Time Warner Inc.’s America Online unit has launched a preliminary version of a lower-priced Internet service it can pitch to penny pinchers who call to drop the flagship service for a cheaper rival.

The modem dial-up service, which debuted earlier this month under AOL’s Netscape brand, costs $1 per month until the end of February, according to details on its Web site. It will cost subscribers $9.95 a month beginning in March, compared to $23.95 a month for the full-fledged AOL service.

The new service is a stripped-down and lower-cost version of AOL’s flagship service, minus extras such as original programming and high speed Internet music videos.

America Online is offering current subscribers a cheaper alternative after watching millions of irate subscribers flee to lower cost competitors such as the Juno and NetZero services owned by United Online Inc.

In the third quarter alone, AOL lost 688,000 subscribers, or 2 million on

a year over year basis.

"At the end of the day, the AOL service just costs too much," said Mark May, an analyst at Kaufman Brothers. "AOL has estimated 10 to 15 percent of the customer that called to disconnect cite price as a reason."

He added, "The Netscape product attempts to address that user."

Mitnick Offers Cash to Hackers

Noted computer hacker Kevin Mitnick is offering cash in exchange for tales of hacking escapades to fill a new book he is writing for publisher John Wiley & Sons.

Mitnick used e-mail messages to online security discussion groups and his Web page to issue a call to the hacking community for stories of online derring-do, promising an award of $500 for the "most provocative story," according to Mitnick.

"I'm putting out a call to all current and former hackers to tell me about your sexiest hack," Mitnick wrote on his Web page, www.freekevin.com, which also provided a phone number and e-mail address for submitting hacking stories.

Mitnick will judge the stories based on their innovation and the ingenuity that hackers used to compromise their targets. Winning stories will involve a combination of technical, physical, and social aspects, Mitnick wrote.

The new book, which may be released as early as October or November of 2004, is tentatively titled "The Art of Intrusion." It is a follow-up to Mitnick's first book, "The Art of Deception." That book focused on so-called "social engineering," the subtle techniques that computer hackers often use to get computer users and administrators to divulge useful information that can be used in attacks.

The new book concentrates on "the untold true stories of the most salacious hacks in history," Mitnick says.

Mitnick will look for stories about hacks against high-value targets such as universities and governments and will agree to keep the author's identity a secret in exchange for the details about how computer networks were compromised, he says.

Unsophisticated hackers who use automated scanning and hacking programs, commonly referred to as "script kiddies," need not apply, Mitnick says.

"I'm looking more for attacks that have an industrial espionage flavor to them," he says. "I look at hacking like a chess game, and I'm looking for stories that are 'Bobbie Fischer-like,'" he says, referring to the American chess grandmaster and 1972 world champion.

In addition to publishing the hackers' untold stories, Mitnick and a co-author will analyze the attacks and offer readers suggestions on how to avoid such attacks on their own networks, he says.

The biggest challenge will be verifying the truth of the stories, Mitnick says.

Proof of the compromise, such as proprietary information taken from the organization, could help to establish the veracity of the hacker’s tale. However, Mitnick is wary of receiving such information and finding himself on the wrong side of the U.S. Justice Department, and he would speak with his lawyers about the legality of receiving such information first, he says.

"If receiving [proprietary information] is not legal, I’ll have to find some other way to exercise due diligence on the stories. I don’t want the book to be fiction," he says.

Mitnick denies that he is in any way encouraging illegal acts by offering money in exchange for stories.

"I certainly don’t want to encourage people to go out and do a hack just to tell me the story," he says.

The escapades of one famous hacker will be absent from the new book: Mitnick himself.

A plea agreement with the U.S. government restricts Mitnick from telling stories about his own hacking until January of 2010, he says.

Nebraska Woman Ticketed for Being Nude on Net

It may be legal to appear naked in cyberspace, but police ticketed a Lincoln woman for posting nude pictures of herself on the Web that were taken in a downtown bar.

Melissa J. Harrington, 21, was ticketed Monday for violating Lincoln’s public nudity ordinance by posting pictures on her Web site "showing her naked at one of our downtown bars and in several other locations around the city," Police Chief Tom Casady said.

"It’s unlawful to be naked in public in Lincoln," he said.

Harrington, who works as a Web designer at a local Bank, says on her Web site that she likes "being naked in public ... even more when there’s a lot of people there to watch."

"They’re not going to stop me from doing what I’m doing. I enjoy what I do and they really don’t have any grounds" to prosecute the case, she said.

Her Web site is linked to another showing explicit pictures of women who purportedly are college students in Nebraska.

Casady said no one has been ticketed in connection with those pictures because it is not apparent where they were taken.

"Some of them are clearly stock photos that someone has gotten from some place else," he said. "Some of them, you just can’t tell where they are."

In Harrington’s case, Casady said it is obvious that the photos were taken inside the Marz Intergalactic Shrimp and Martini Bar.

The owner of the bar, Jerry Luth, told Omaha television station KETV he is

extremely upset by the pictures and did not give Harrington permission to shoot the pictures at the bar.

"I’m the one who called police to complain about the nude pictures," said Luth.

Casady said the police department planned to send a letter to the state Liquor Control Commission to see if the bar violated any state laws.

Harrington was to be arraigned in Lancaster County Court on Jan 29. If convicted, she faces a maximum penalty of six months in jail and a $500 fine.

Cyber Blackmail Wave Targets Office Workers

Cyber blackmail artists are shaking down office workers, threatening to delete computer files or install pornographic images on their work PCs unless they pay a ransom, police and security experts said.

The extortion scam, which is believed to have surfaced one year ago, indiscriminately targets anyone on the corporate ladder with a PC connected to the Internet.

It usually starts with a threatening e-mail in which the author claims to have the power to take over a worker’s computer through an exploit in the corporate network, experts said.

The e-mail typically contains a demand that unless a small fee is paid - at first no more than $20 or $30 - they will attack the PC with a file-wiping program or download onto the machine images of child pornography.

"They prey on the nice secretary who wouldn’t do anything wrong. When she gets one of these e-mails she thinks ’Oh, my goodness what am I going to do?’ So she puts it on her credit card and transfers the funds to the (suspect’s online bank) account and hopes it goes away," a British detective specializing in cyber-crime told Reuters.

The officer advised against cooperating with the fraudsters. "If a person pays up, say it’s just 20 euros, then they have identified a soft target. They may come back for more, next time demanding more money."

In the annals of cyber-crime, investigators acknowledge the racket is one of the most difficult to crack. Because the ransom is small, people tend to pay up and keep quiet.

Police said the number of cases is tailing off but because it so often goes unreported, there is little evidence the crime is actually in decline.

According to Finnish computer security firm, F-Secure, a large Scandinavian university was hit earlier this month.

Several university officials received an e-mail from a fraudster who appeared to be based in Estonia, said F-Secure research manager Mikko Hypponen.

The e-mail said several security vulnerabilities had been detected on the university’s network and that unless the e-mail recipient transferred 20

euros ($25) to the author's online bank account, he would release a series of viruses capable of deleting a host of computer files.

Hypponen said he advised the university to take the necessary precautions, alert police and not pay. "A lot of these cases are simply bluffing. But I'm sure there are both bluffs and actual cases," said Hypponen.

Police say crime gangs have turned cyber extortion into a tidy business of late.

A preferred tool is the crude, but effective denial-of-service attack on a company's network, capable of crippling it with an overwhelming flood of data.

There are scores of cases of companies - particularly small and medium-sized firms - receiving extortion threats that demand the victim transfer money to the fraudster's bank account or the attacks will grow in severity, police said.

Fraudsters also send out streams of menacing e-mails with hollow threats of cyber sabotage. The scam works even if only a handful of the countless recipients follow through and pay up.

"It's getting simpler," said Hypponen. "If you wanted to extort money from a small company you would have had to hack them and convince them you have stolen their information. Here, you don't have to do anything but send an e-mail around."

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